DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 337 519 UD 028 275

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TITLE Testimony for Public Forum on Hispanic Education (Miami, Florida, May 18, 1990).
INSTITUTION Aspira, Inc., New York, N.Y.
PUB DATE 18 May 90
NOTE 12p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Reports - General (140) -- Legal/Legislative/Regulatory Materials (090)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Aspiration; Administrator Role; Community Role; Cultural Awareness; Curriculum Development; *Dropout Prevention; Education Work Relationship; Hearings; High Schools; *High School Students; Hispanic Americans; Parent Influence; Position Papers; School Community Relationship; *School Holding Power; Teacher Role; Urban Problems; *Urban Youth
IDENTIFIERS Aspira Inc; *Latinos; Testimony

ABSTRACT

The crisis of dropping out among Latino high school students points directly to the important role that teachers, counselors, administrators, parents, and community groups can play in creating for each student a vision of the future that includes postsecondary education. The Five Cities High School Dropout Study, which documents the effect of key variables on school dropping out or staying in among Latino youth, deserves the consideration of the President's Task Force on Hispanic Education. Other findings argue for reforms and improvement in institutional conditions. The New York State Regents' initiatives and the findings of the Urban Principals Study support the need for greater attention to the cultural relevance of the content of the curriculum and the organization of instruction. ASPIRA of New York emphasizes youth leadership development through academic achievement and community service. ASPIRA has also offered a set of recommendations for action to J. A. Fernandez, Schools Chancellor in New York City. A recent study hypothesizes that Latino students are more likely to drop out, or complete less school, because they see less of a path to a career through education and so have less reason to stay in school. (JB)

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TESTIMONY

for

PUBLIC FORUM ON HISPANIC EDUCATION

Miami, Florida

May 18, 1990

ED382519

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Submitted by:

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My name is Dr. Luis O. Reyes, Deputy Director for Research & Advocacy for ASPIRA of New York, Inc. - the founding organization in the ASPIRA Association. ASPIRA of New York did not participate in the Association's Five Cities High School Dropout Study but it is a participant in the Association's two-year Hispanic Community Mobilization for Dropout Prevention project - funded by the U.S. Department of Education.

James Cummins of the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education is quoted in the Urban Principals study, as follows:

> Widespread school failure doesn't occur in minority groups that are positively oriented toward both their own and the dominant culture, that do not perceive themselves as inferior to the dominant group and (they) are not alienated from their own cultural value(s).

This quote captures well what ASPIRA as a movement and a community-based organization is really all about. Twenty-nine years of experience in serving and advocating on behalf of Puerto Rican and other Latino youth have only strengthened our commitment to the mission of developing Latino youth leaders through educational achievement and service to the Latino community.

I would like to address my remarks today to the implications of the Five Cities High School Dropout Study - implications for research, advocacy, direct student services, for community mobilization, for parent involvement/empowerment and for coalition efforts.

It is clear from a reading of the various reports generated by this research project that this rich database can be the basis of further research analysis and follow -up studies. Subsequent graduation and attrition data concerning the 1200 ninth graders who were surveyed should provide new insights about the roles that community, family, school and student variables play in students' decisions to drop out or stay in school. It would be helpful to have survey and interview data from the teachers of these students to round out the comprehensive picture we are developing from this study.

The Five Cities Study has clear policy implications at the national level concerning the education of Latino youth. It is hoped that the President's Task Force on Hispanic Education - chaired by the Secretary of Education, Dr. Lauro Cavazos - gives serious consideration to the findings and recommendations of this study, especially with regards to school-related variables that contribute to dropping out and over which schools and parents can exert greater control.

While the federal government and the nation's governors are engaged in an historic dialog about setting national goals for education (with measurable benchmarks), it is appropriate also to set national standards regarding school conditions and practices. The Five Cities Study documents the effect of key variables on school dropping out or staying in school among Latino youth, as follows:

- truancy is more frequent among potential dropouts
- lower educational expectations are related to dropout behavior
- dropouts are more likely to be older and to have repeated a grade than stay-ins
- grades are related to grade repetition (stay-ins, on average, have the equivalent of one letter grade advantage over dropouts)
- stay-ins are slightly more likely to have a father present than dropouts

These and other findings argue for reforms and improvements in institutional conditions, including the following:

- monitoring attendance patterns and providing immediate attention, especially to long-term absentees
- ensuring that transfer students, especially students with limited English proficiency who migrate or immigrate to schools in the continental U.S., are placed appropriately and not automatically demoted a grade
- providing basic skills tutoring and flexible scheduling of credit-bearing courses (P.M., weekend, and summer classes) so that overage students may accumulate credits towards graduation in a timely fashion
- increasing opportunities for students to combine school attendance and supervised part-time work
- promoting active student learning and engagement with the school by improving the cultural relevance of instructional content, by incorporating cooperative learning approaches and by encouraging Latino students to participate in extra curricular activities
- providing career education and counseling services to expand educational expectations and to help Latino students develop a vision of a personal future that includes post-secondary education
- avoiding grade retention in promotional policies (especially in the early grades) except as a final resort
- involving parents and the Latino community in the life of the school, and empowering them to influence curriculum and instruction and to improve school climate

The New York State Board of Regents have promulgated a Children's Bill of Rights that sets standards, including a respect for the students' home language and culture, the right to a safe and secure school environment and to equal access to quality instruction. The Council of Chief State School Officers in recent years also developed a set of Assurances or Minimal Guarantees for students placed at-risk which address institutional conditions and assure quality education for these children and youth. The present ASPIRA study supports these initiatives with empirical evidence about their effects on Latino youth's educational attainment.

The findings in the Urban Principals Study support, specifically, the need for greater attention to the cultural relevance of the content of the curriculum and the organization of instruction, a finding very much in tune with state initiatives to infuse all curriculum with multicultural perspectives. The New York State Regents' initiatives to develop community schools is likewise supported by these findings. These community schools would make the school the center of learning in their neighborhoods by providing a longer school day during which students can receive various support services addressing their particular health, recreational, and social needs while parents and adult community members can participate more fully in school governance activities. This explicit linkage between the school and the community is seen as benefiting both institutions while improving educational outcomes for students, especially minority students living under stressful conditions.

ASPIRA of New York continues to stress the intrinsic links between schools and the Latino community by its emphasis on youth leadership development through academic achievement and community service. At the same time, we in ASPIRA have continued to advocate for the transformation of the schools, which today are in crisis. We view the failure of the schools to educate Latino children and youth as systemic; and we see the solutions to be found in fundamental reforms, not add-on programs that are band-aids. The schools must become more open and collaborative in their relationships with Latino parents and communities.

We have presented the newly appointed Schools Chancellor in New York City, Dr. Joseph A. Fernandez, with a set of recommendations for action which mirror many of the recommendations I have already discussed. Among the recommendations not already mentioned are:

- expansion of bilingual programs to serve marginally English proficient students (a reform implemented this school year at both the city and state level)

- student empowerment through peer mediation and conflict resolution training

- dual literacy bilingual programs for students with interrupted schooling and limited native-language literacy

- expansion of pre-collegiate programs beginning in the middle schools, to improve Latino students' access to vocational and career education programs

- training of Latino and language minority parents as advocates for their children's education and expansion of adult education classes, especially ESL programs leading to the high school equivalency diploma, as an incentive for Latino parents to complete their own secondary education and to be able to assist their children in their schooling

- review, integration and dissemination to parents and community groups of the Board of Education's principal policy statements with a view to ensuring that policies are coordinated, understandable and implemented in ways that are student-centered, school-based and reflective of a multilingual, multicultural philosophy of education

- development and implementation of a multi-year Multicultural Education Plan including guidelines and procedures for program, staff and curriculum development and guidelines for the review of textbook and instructional materials to ensure that they are free of stereotypical views of any group and that they accurately reflect the history, contributions and struggles of the racial and cultural groups that make up American society

- implementation and expansion of bilingual pre-kindergarten programs to meet the instructional and developmental needs of the 50 percent of eligible five year olds who come from language minority homes

- establishment of policy and regulations mandating the provision of comprehensive and coordinated guidance and support services for <u>all</u> students at <u>all</u> grade levels, and based on developmental and preventive approaches

- revision of student disciplinary policies to foster school safety, a positive school climate and the development of responsibility among students, while upholding their due process rights

- restructuring of middle school and large zoned neighborhood high schools to address severe overcrowding and student alienation through the development of house plans, mini-schools and integrated magnet programs

- establishment of a Chancellor's city wide High School Youth Council to provide students with a mechanism for input on school policies, for raising issues that concern youth and exercising and developing leadership

- implementation of a comprehensive Affirmative Action Plan to increase the presence of qualified Latinos in pedagogical and administrative positions - tied to comprehensive staff development programs which focus on the philosophy, attitudes, knowledge base, skills, practices and procedures that are essential in meeting the needs of a multi-ethnic and multilingual student population

- funding of school-based parent involvement and education programs and establishment of a Parent Leadership Institute (with a bilingual component) that would train parents to become informed advocates for their children and prepare them to participate in school-based management and shared-decision making.

A soon-to-be released study on Latino students in the NYC dropout prevention programs by Teachers College professors, Joseph C. Grannis and Maria E. Torres-Guzman provides findings and recommendations that are consistent with ASPIRA's Five Cities Dropout Study. They are relevant to the concerns of the President's Task Force on Hispanic Education and reinforce ASPIRA of New York's recommendations.

Among Latino at-risk students targeted for dropout prevention services at the middle school, the strongest gains in courses passed were made by limited English proficient(LEP) students, who were helped by participating in bilingual or ESL classes. The researchers state that:

> "...the area of educational and occupational expectations emerges as one that is most likely to be associated with Hispanic students' subsequent rates of completing school ...career education and educational planning need to be greatly strengthened...and might be particularly important for Hispanic students."

The findings concerning the Latino students in the high school dropout prevention program indicate that:

- a majority came from non-traditional families
- thirty-five percent were LEP or marginally English proficient students
- almost one-half were in the ninth grade and over one-half were two or more years over age for their grade
- Latino students particularly appeared to need academic support if they were participating in a part-time jobs program
- Latinos, especially females, tended to see fewer connections between current and future education and a career
- Latino students indicated a lower sense of control over school matters.

Grannis and Torres-Guzman hypothesize that Latino students are more likely to drop out, or complete less school, because they see less of a path to a career through education and, therefore, have less reason to stay in school. They state:

> ...Career education and educational planning might be particularly crucial for Hispanic students...Students gaining a sense of control over their educational and career decisions would be an important aim.
>
> ...The relative success of LEP students may not argue just for extending bilingual education or ESL to marginally English proficient students but for making culturally appropriate adaptations of the curriculum to all groups of students.

In conclusion, these various reports on the crisis of dropping out among Latino students point directly to the important role that teachers, counselors, administrators, parents and community groups can play in creating for each student a vision of the future that includes post-secundary education. The burden has to be placed on school personnel since most Latino parents (60 to 65 percent) lack a high school diploma and fewer (8 percent) have a college degree. Parents, however, can play a key role in motivating students to stay in school by working closely with teachers and counselors in fostering in their children a desire to better themselves educationally and providing a home environment conducive to discipline, good habits and learning.

Although I have not addressed the issues of resource allocation and program implementation in these remarks, it is painfully obvious that, historically, initiatives designed to deal with the dropout crisis have been developed and funded as a consequence of external community pressure. Institutional resistance and the lack of internally originated systematic plans has, in many instances, doomed the chances of programmatic success at the inception level. A clear and unwavering institutional commitment must become the ***sine qua non*** of all dropout prevention efforts. This will, in turn, translate into the adequate resource allocation and collaborative program implementation essential to the success of initiatives designed to retain our Latino students in the high schools.

Policy makers must seek more resources for pre-collegiate programs, pay increasing attention to strategies that will make school more meaningful to students (tying curriculum more directly to employment, engaging students more actively in the learning process, and making instruction more culturally relevant and responsive to Latino students and their community) and providing the necessary support for families, especially those headed by a single parent.

These efforts will require a partnership that includes community-based organizations like ASPIRA that incorporate a vision for Latino youth that includes educational achievement, leadership development and preparation for adult roles as contributing members of their community. We call on the Federal government to invest the necessary resources and promote this partnership between schools, parents and the Latino community, if we are to ensure a healthy national economy for the years to come. We believe that federal officials, including Education Secretary, Lauro Cavazos, should avoid finger-pointing (which misses the mark when blaming parents for a phenomenon over which they have inadequate control) and, instead, play a true leadership role in setting national goals and national standards of quality education for all students.